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ABSTRACT

Absenteeism is frequently cited as the most troublesome day-to-day problem for secondary school administrators. There are no perfect answers to the problem. A strong stand on absenteeism usually results in only partial success, but a permissive policy often produces many more absences. A report on absenteeism by Educational Research Service found a correlation between high attendance rates and high achievement scores. Punitive attendance policies appear to result in higher attendance rates for most students and higher achievement scores for students with low IQs, but no achievement gains for high IQ students. In some states, lowering a student's grade solely because of absenteeism is illegal. Incentive programs show mixed results. The best attendance policies involve administrators, teachers, students, and parents in policy-making. The most successful policies are strong, specify expectations and outcomes clearly, are well publicized, and are consistently enforced. A description of attendance policies and procedures used throughout the country concludes this newsletter. (Author/JM)

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The Practitioner

A Newsletter for the On-Line Administrator

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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Absenteeism: The Perpetual Problem

The second labor of Hercules was to go to Lerna and kill a creature with nine heads called the Hydra which lived in a swamp there. This was exceedingly hard to do, because one of the heads was immortal and the others almost as bad, inasmuch as when Hercules chopped off one, two grew up instead.[1]

Principals continue to be frustrated by the problem that won't go away, student absenteeism. In NASSP's April 1978 survey, attendance once again was tagged as the most troublesome day-to-day problem in the administration of secondary schools. Like Hydra, this nagging enigma apparently survives all forms of attack.

Student truancy also is seen as the perpetual handicap of administrators in NASSP's new national study of the high school principalship.[2] When asked to identify the major constraints faced in carrying out job responsibilities, principals placed student absenteeism and student motivation at the top of the list. Surprisingly, these absentee—attitudinal factors topped all other federal, state, and local obstacles as presenting the most difficulty to schools.

The Dilemma

How does the principal begin to solve absenteeism, a problem caused by all sorts of personal, family, community, and school factors? How can a policy be effective when, for instance, absentee rates have a weekly cycle with Monday being the worst day, as well as a yearly cycle with May being the worst month?

Administrative actions and policies alone cannot eliminate absenteeism. A strong stand on absenteeism will result only in partial success. But the alternative is even less acceptable. A permissive policy results in a rising tide of absences which in turn hamstrings the effort of teachers to educate students. The dilemma is real. It also is clear: Be satisfied with small victories in the battle for good attendance!

1. Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (New York: Mentor Books, 1969) p. 164.
2. NASSP, *The Senior High School Principalship*. Vols. I and II (Reston, Va.: National Association of Secondary School Principals) 1978.

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Absences are a fact of school life in the same way that adult absences are a part of the workplace. But adult truancy is not a growing problem, and herein lies one piece of intelligence useful to principals. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, adult absenteeism has changed little in the 20 years from 1957 to 1976.[3]

Why then should we expect student absenteeism to be higher today than a generation ago? The average adult worker missed about nine days of work in 1976 with six days out for illness or injury and three for civic or personal reasons. For students, this would equal about seven absent days when prorated for the nine-month school year. Principals, especially those of larger schools, would be pleased with an absentee level that low.

Most student absences in the past were attributable to illness. For example, in a 1928 study illness was found to cause 93 percent of absences while truancy accounted for only two and a half percent. A 1939 Oregon study found illness as the overwhelming cause of absenteeism with "colds, sore throats and the flu" alone accountable for 50 percent of the missing students. Today, however, absences are likely to be for personal convenience or recreation and not for illness. Most health officials consider a four percent absentee rate as "normal" for reasons of health. This equals seven days per school year, the same as the adult equivalency mentioned above.

Certainly one objective for any attendance policy is to reduce the incidence of casual truancy, that which is not related to illness or severe family problems. A realistic level of absenteeism, therefore, is perhaps seven days per year for the student of "average health," and only three or four days per year for the hearty student. An annual absentee rate of more than 10 days, therefore, would be excessive except for students with severe health problems or unusual family circumstances. The dilemma is finding ways to control absenteeism at this level without expending excessive amounts of manpower and money on the problem.

Larry Liebers, principal of Vail High School in Montebello, Calif., suggests that the administrator who finds a method to reduce absenteeism significantly will become an international celebrity! While none of the contributors to this report has managed to gain that stature, the techniques and policies described in this update of the 1975 *Practitioner* on attendance have produced good rates of student attendance.

Absenteeism and Achievement

A new report on absenteeism by Educational Research Service (ERS) indicates a relationship between attendance and achievement.[4] In an era concerned with declining student achievement, these findings are significant.

Among the studies summarized by ERS are these:

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3. *Behavioral Sciences Newsletter,* July 1978, p. 3.
4. ERS, *Student Absenteeism,* Educational Research Service, Inc., 1800 N. Kent St., Arlington, Va. 22209, 1977 ($8.50).

- ✓ Twelfth grade students with five or more unexcused absences per year showed less growth in achievement on three standardized tests than did seniors with better attendance records. (Summers and Wolf, 1975)

- ✓ The relationship between absenteeism and student achievement results, at least partially, from variations in the school's policy toward absenteeism. (Heim, 1973)

- ✓ Student grades are related significantly to attendance, though residual gains were not associated with individual grade point averages and attendance. (Jenne, 1973)

- ✓ Eleventh grade students with higher attendance had a more responsible attitude, enjoyment of school, and success in a school setting. (Coldiron and Skiffington, 1975)

Also of interest is a recent study conducted by William Brokowski, assistant principal at New Milford, Conn., who explored the relationships of various factors with the adoption of a more restrictive policy. He compared the performance of students in attendance, tardiness, course failures, academic average, participation in extracurricular activities, and disciplinary suspensions prior to and during a tight control policy for attendance.

The new policy included a lowering of academic grades and withholding of course credit for students violating the policy. For example, a 20-absence limit for the year was enforced with the number being prorated for other than full-year courses and for courses meeting less than five periods per week.

Brokowski found several significant relationships. He cautions that conclusions should not be generalized beyond the study sample except for schools similar to New Milford, a suburban community of 17,000 persons located in fast-growing northwestern Connecticut with 1,250 students in grades nine to 12. Approximately half of each graduating class attends college.

Findings indicated that when the restrictive policy was in operation, attendance and participation in student activities improved for the entire sample group. Further analysis, however, reflected these results for specific categories of students:[5]

- Older students with low IQs exhibited the most improved performance under the policy; i.e., higher attendance, decrease in number of course failures, increase in academic average, and participation in activities.
- Students with high IQs developed no significant differences in performance for attendance and achievement variables.
- Students with low IQs developed a significant increase in suspensions.

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5. William Brokowski, *A Comparison of Secondary School Student Performance in Attendance, Achievement, and Related Variables Prior to and During a Restrictive and Punitive Administrative Control Policy for Attendance* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Connecticut, Storrs, in preparation).

The implications arising from this study are summarized by Brokowski:

- The implementation of a restrictive and punitive administrative control policy for attendance may result in improved performance in attendance and achievement for certain students. The maturity and ability levels of students should be recognized for the appropriateness and desirability of such policies.

- Additional strategies for attendance beyond restrictive or punitive rules should be devised to improve student performance in attendance and achievement since the findings of this study indicate that all students evidently do not perform more favorably on these variables.

Will Incentives Work?

Incentive programs show mixed results. For example, in Plymouth, Minn., attendance pins and gifts such as a television set were offered for perfect attendance. While attendance increased for some students, failure to reach "chronic absentees" has caused the principal and his staff to reassess the situation and return to a more traditional, structured approach.

In Iowa's Glenwood Senior High School an attendance procedure involving a 10 percent grade bonus for students with perfect attendance for a 45-day grading period (nine percent for one absence, eight percent for two, etc., down to zero percent for 10 days) has worked effectively in two ways according to Robert Blasi, principal:

. . . first, attendance is better (now a three percent absence rate)

and

. . . second, it gives students with low academic ability, but present every day, some extra credit for attendance.

This brief review suggests that an incentive policy to be successful must be designed for the chronic absentees as well as for more typical students. As with many areas of human life, the causes of motivation can be cumulative, however, and incentives may be useful as the "carrot" along with restrictions which act as the "stick."

Parents as Partners

Eighty-six percent of the citizens in George Gallup's 1978 poll of attitudes about the public schools stated that parents should be held responsible for their children's attendance at school. While some administrators may dream of such an idyllic state, the fact remains that if schools don't take the initiative with parents on attendance, then levels plummet downward.

In short, schools must organize and enlist the assistance of parents to improve student attendance. Many principals follow an approach similar to one outlined by Sidney Faucette, principal of Central High School, and presented to the Luneburg County, Va., board of education:

> The Planning Council and the principal have designed an attendance policy which attempts to meet the following criteria:
>
> 1. Remove chance and reason for dishonesty—no excused/unexcused decision.
> 2. Change from punitive to responsibility-inducing policy which is nonaccusatory.
> 3. Shift burden for attendance from school to parent and student.
> 4. Have the school board take a definitive, strong position on the value of regular attendance.
> 5. Cause students to accept classwork missed for absences as postponed and not just missed.
> 6. Notify parents of student absences at intervals.
> 7. Ensure that a student receives 75 hours of instruction per semester and 150 hours per year for each credit as stated in the accreditation standards.
> 8. Incorporate the thoughts of parents and display sensitivity to the community.
> 9. Provide due process for a student who has exceeded an absence limit.
> 10. Emphasize for teachers that meaningful instruction must take place so the student who is present is not punished for attendance.

There are many advantages to involving parents in the development of attendance policies. Not only is the final product viewed as incorporating parental concerns, but also important situational factors such as school size and community ethos are considered. The result is a stronger and more widespread support for attendance policies and for their enforcement.

Beware the Quicksand!

Certain state codes restrict the options that local districts employ to contain absenteeism. The Administrative Code of the State of Washington, for instance, states that the "reduction of a student's grade or grades solely on the basis of tardiness or absenteeism clearly is illegal." (WAC 180-40-235) This rule is reflected in a recent attendance committee report of the Seattle principals which notes that:

> Loss of credit for missed assignments due to unexcused absences shall not be a disciplinary device. Therefore, a truant student's grade shall not be affected if no graded activity or assignment is missed during an unexcused absence.

Few states place such specific restrictions upon the enforcement of compulsory attendance laws. But the legality of lowering student grades for poor attendance is still undetermined across the nation. Thomas J. Pepe concluded from a survey of chief state school officers that until further case law is developed, no definitive legal response can be offered to the question, "Can a student's grade legally be lowered for unexcused absences?[6]

Withholding course credit for nonattendance is another matter, however. So far, a policy of withholding credit has not been successfully challenged in court. Such a policy, however, should include these elements:

- A statement that adequate class attendance and participation is a requirement for course credit.
- A statement defining the absentee rate considered as inadequate for credit.
- Opportunity for due process, to include the right of appeal for excessive absences caused by mitigating circumstances.

In addition, the policy must be (a) adopted by the board of education and (b) widely distributed to parents, students, and teachers.

In today's legalistic world, it also may prove helpful to include adequate attendance and good class participation as course objectives to be evaluated upon conclusion of the course.

Certainly no legal precedent exists for defining public schools as correspondence institutions, obligated to grant credit to students who simply pass the unit tests. A good reference on the matter of academic dismissal is NASSP's *Legal Memorandum* of October 1977.

Policy Guidelines

Successful policies of student attendance vary in their details. Certain common themes, however, are present in most of the approaches:

- Participation in the formulation of attendance policy is broad based. Administrators, teachers, students, and parents usually are involved in policy making.
- The policies are strong. When little or nothing is done about attendance the problem gets worse. Schools making headway on attendance are schools that expend considerable thought and effort on solving the problem.
- Policies clearly specify, in writing, attendance expectations and delineate the outcomes of good and poor attendance.

6. Thomas J. Pepe, "Student Grades and School Discipline—A Philosophical and Legal Question," *Nolpe School Law Journal*, 1977, No. 2, p. 152.

- Policies are well publicized. Parents and students clearly are informed of attendance requirements.
- Policies are consistently enforced. At each level of enforcement—teacher, counselor, assistant principal, principal—compliance with policy is expected.
- Immediate follow-up on absences is made by a letter, a telephone call to the home, or by some other means.

Curriculum policies also affect attendance, of course. Research shows lower rates of absenteeism for students attending a particular school for the special courses it offers.[7] Many subschool arrangements have been successful in reducing absenteeism, as have special team teaching and home room plans. The focus of this *Practitioner*, however, is upon schoolwide policies, not programs for special groups within the total student body.

To Illustrate

A variety of policies and procedures are described here to trigger thinking about effective approaches to student attendance. Ingenuity still is at work, providing recurrent hope that this many-headed monster may yet be tamed by some resourceful administrator.

Andover High School — Andover, Mass. 01810
Enrollment 1,500
Philip F. Wormwood, Principal

Adoption of an individualized attendance procedure in the suburban community of Andover in 1975 increased attendance from 89 percent to almost 93 percent.

More responsibility is placed on parents for their child's attendance. Parents are asked to sign a contract for one of two categories. In Category I the parent feels his child should be present every day and if absent he will provide a written note when the student returns to school. Parents will be notified only when the conduct or attendance becomes problematic. Notification occurs before a course failure due to attendance. Parents selecting Category II must notify the school the morning of a student's absence. These parents ask to be contacted by the school if there has been no call from them and the student is absent.

This has saved a great deal of time in the administration of attendance according to Wilbur G. Hixon, assistant principal, since it is not necessary under such a policy to contact every parent by phone when absence occurs. The policy has also, as indicated above, led to a significant increase in attendance since its inception in 1974-75.

7. ERS, *Student Absenteeism*, p. 7.

Pennridge South Junior High School
Enrollment 465
Frederick N. Schwenk, Principal

Fifty & Cedar Sts.
Perkasie, Pa. 18944

A weekly attendance council meeting held at Pennridge South has improved attendance remarkably in the past three years.

The council consists of a guidance counselor, the school nurse, the assistant principal, and the principal. It is chaired by a full-time teacher who is released from all other noninstructional duties. Cases of nonattendance are reviewed each week and prompt action is taken. A student is allowed three days of unexcused absence. After that has occurred, reports Schwenk, a warning letter is sent to parents requesting a doctor's note when the child returns to school.

A follow-up phone call is made if parents do not cooperate and the final penalty is a monetary fine (according to the State of Pennsylvania Code).

Reporting several days of 100 percent attendance in his school, Schwenk attributes the success of the policy to increased home/school concerns with attendance and a "team" attack on unusual cases of absenteeism.

Sandusky High School
Enrollment 1,950
Jack Freitas, Principal

2130 Hayes Ave.
Sandusky, Ohio 44870

A cooperative relationship between the schools and courts in Sandusky is a prime reason for ending much frustration for local administrators. Twice a year the court staff and the high school administrative staff meet socially and a rapport between them is responsible for the effectiveness of the attendance policy.

The following procedures are used at Sandusky:

- After a period of six to eight weeks of school, those students who have demonstrated a chronic truancy pattern of 20 to 30 days of absence are listed and referred to the Juvenile Court by the deans at Sandusky High School.
- Prior to submitting this list to the court, every effort has been made by the school to establish a working relationship with the parents and to improve the attendance through counseling and psychological assistance.
- Once the court receives the lists, the parents are notified of a hearing date. (Ohio law provides the juvenile courts with discretionary powers to deal with matters relating to truancy.)

- If the parents and child do not appear at the hearing, the child is removed from school by court order and informed that he may not reenter school without court approval.

- If the parent and child do appear for the hearing, two actions may occur:

  a. The child is placed on probation and ordered by the judge to return to school and maintain a record of consistent attendance.

  b. If it is evident that probation will not improve the situation, the child is ordered out of school for the balance of the school year. A return to school the next year may occur only after another court hearing.

"This process has had a very positive effect upon Sandusky's youth. School becomes somewhat of a privilege after their experience in court," according to Freitas.

Bristol Eastern High School
Enrollment 1,700
Jon D. Matt, Principal

632 King St.
Bristol, Conn. 00010

Responsibility for attendance at Bristol Eastern is placed on the students in an attempt to develop their awareness of the "importance of their role in building academic integrity into their school program." Students are not entitled to any class cuts.

A penalty of withdrawal from class is imposed for students who miss more than 20 times a year (or 10 times a semester) provided the student does not elect to use an appeals procedure.

A review board has been established to consider appeals. The board consists of an administrator as chairman, an impartial faculty member, and the student's guidance counselor as voting members. The student's teacher(s) are involved as nonvoting member(s) of the board when feasible.

Parents and students must substantiate to the review board whether or not an absence is legitimate.

This policy, now in its third year, has reduced absenteeism from 12 percent three years ago to six and a half percent last year.

Maynard High School
Enrollment 560
Kenneth A. Abbott, Principal

Great Road
Maynard, Mass. 01754

A policy involving loss of credit for absenteeism in Maynard has reduced class absences from 22.9 percent in 1973-74 to 6.3 percent in 1976-77. More significantly, since students are no longer permitted to be in school and not go to class, student failure has been reduced by 50 percent.

> The attendance policy in September 1976, requires students to be in class at least 85 percent of the days school is in session or lose academic credit. On the fifteenth absence, based upon a 90-day semester the student loses one-half credit. On the nineteenth absence, the student loses all course credit. Absences due to prolonged illnesses are not charged to the student. Also, the student's mark for the course is not affected.

South High Community School
Enrollment 1,600
John P. Whalen, Principal

170 Apricot St.
Worcester, Mass. 01603

Project Orbit is an alternative educational program designed for freshmen who indicate difficulty adhering to a "full-day" schedule.

Early identification of chronic absentees is done from feeder schools and such students are placed on the Orbit schedule, which typically looks as follows in the ninth grade:

ORBIT English/Reading	— Small class; individualized attention
ORBIT Learning to Live	— Values clarification, group counseling
Freshmen—Introductory Math I	— Mainstreamed
Physical Education	— Mainstreamed
ORBIT EXTERNSHIP	— Early release; work for credit
Elective	

In many cases the program has improved attendance and helped prepare participants for assimilation into the conventional school program.

William J. Palmer High School
Enrollment 1,400
Lee Higgins, Principal

301 N. Nevada Ave.
Colorado Springs, Colo.
80903

Palmer's attendance policy reports student progress to students and to parents at set intervals for nonattendance.

Five separate categories of action are called for . . . according to the number of student absences from class. Responsibilities for school staff are clearly spelled out. For example:

Category III. (after seven absences)

a. The Teacher:

1. Completes the attendance Data Form and delivers to the attendance office.

b. The Attendance Clerk:

1. Calls home.

c. The Dean:

1. Meets with the student and warns that continued nonattendance could result in the student's being dropped from class without further chance to earn credit.

2. Completes a student Conference Verification Form and has the student sign it.

After the procedures for each category are followed and fully documented, the teacher may recommend a "nonattendance F drop" to the dean. A review board exists for student appeals when "nonattendance F grades" are given.

Absenteeism has declined to such an extent that the average daily attendance is now 95.4 percent. Also, there has been a 37 percent decrease in period truancies per girl and a 41 percent decrease in period truancies per boy. Furthermore, a comparative study of first semester grades in 1976 and 1977 showed that more students achieved honors grades and fewer students earned D and F grades.

The policy "stresses that communication with students and parents from teachers, counselors, and administrators regarding school matters does affect student attendance and achievement."

Dinwiddie County Senior High School
Enrollment 1,150
R. Beasley Jones, Principal

P.O. Box 299
Dinwiddie, Va. 23401

A "no excuse" policy has been implemented in Dinwiddie which has two major assets:

1. Increased student freedom. (The student is no longer required to bring in notes to explain his absence.)

2. Clinically, there is less paperwork for attendance personnel and parents receive documented notices of student absences.

The success of this policy is in the hands of two individuals:

The student, who is responsible for his own attendance.

The teacher, who is responsible for keeping accurate records.

The student must be in class working toward those agreed-upon and established goals of a course at least 80 percent of the number of days in each grading period. Excessive absences and tardies, unless there are extenuating circumstances, mean failure. John C. Stewart, assistant principal, reports, "We have had far fewer early dismissals, fewer chronic absentees, and less truancy. I feel that this policy has been very effective."

Hermantown High School
Enrollment 475
Ray L. Wero, Principal

4190 Ugstad Rd.
Duluth, Minn. 55811

"A sure cure for kids that are late to school."

If you have trouble with some students who are continually late for school, have your secretary give you their phone numbers and call them before 6:00 a.m. the next day after they are late. If that doesn't work (and it will) call them a little earlier next time. I guarantee beautiful results. (I wonder how it would work with teachers who are late continually?) This takes about 10 seconds, no lecturing or office visits are necessary. You can even wish them to have a good day or tell them it's room service.

Incidentally—if you are reluctant to call—have the student call you at 6:00 a.m. If he fails to do this tell him you'll call him at 6:02, and do it.

This Practitioner was developed by Nancy De Leonibus, research associate for NASSP.

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